Feeling Rules in Mexico: Crying in Colonial Contexts

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My paper opens with a tree in modern day Mexico City. This gnarled specimen, which has been set on fire twice in recent history is what remains of the cypress tree under which the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés is said to have wept on 30 June 1520. Fleeing from the “Aztecs,” across one of the four causeways that connected the spectacular island city of Tenochtitlan on Lake Texcoco with the mainland, this was a pivotal moment in the conquest – a moment of defeat before victory -- when Cortés had lost between 400 and 600 men, not forgetting at least 1000 indigenous allies from the nearby city-state of Tlaxcala.

I’ve been fascinated in the Noche Triste, or Night of Sorrows, for longer than I can remember – certainly long before I became aware of the emotions as a category for historical and cultural analysis. Why is it still called the Night of Sorrows? For whom was it sorrowful? Why is it often termed the famed Night of Sorrows in historical accounts, and yet has so far been subject to scant analysis. What is more, as a form of emotional expression, the tears of Hernán Cortés – if he did indeed shed them, and we cannot take this as a given – have received even less scrutiny. Today in the ten minutes I have, I want to do three things. (i) set the tears of Hernán Cortés within a the broader project of which they are a part; (ii) talk briefly about the study of the emotions in Latin American/Mexican Studies; (iii) “Dare to Compare”: discuss some of the problems when we come to compare emotions in the contact period. At all points, what I want to do is raise some of the methodological challenges associated with the project.

The analysis in the broader project [www.andreanoble.org] will center on tears and crying because, from the conquest through to modern times, my claim is that Mexican history has been marked by emblematic moments of public weeping, which in different ways have become etched in the national imagination. To shed tears, or to withhold them, has the potential
to express a wide range of what we now call “emotions:” anger, fear, frustration, sadness, shame, happiness, etc. Crying is, then, an ambiguous and versatile act of emotional display, one which can reveal much about how individuals and groups relate to one another, and how social compacts come into existence, are maintained, or are dissolved and reconfigured. Tears are determined by situational elements, and cannot be studied in isolation from the social, political, ethnic, and historical structures in which they are embedded. (Ebersole 2000) As an entity forged in the encounter between Amerindians and Europeans -- each with their own values, rules and systems –the contact zone and the tears of Hernán Cortés are a compelling place to start, even if it does take me out of my comfort zone.

Emotions in Mexico: the status and significance of the emotions has started to make an impact on the field of Mexican social and cultural history. There is, for example, a growing body of Spanish-language scholarship by Mexico-based researchers, whose work is informed by mentalités historiography and by an interest in the everyday. Focused on individual emotions and emotional dispositions in national history –fear and love; pleasure and suffering --this work is of undeniable importance. On the whole, however, this work has been developed in isolation from emotions history as practiced in Anglo academy, which leads us to ask whether methodological paradigms developed in one context are fit for purpose when carried to others? By contrast, most recently, Javier Villa-Flores’s and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera’s *Emotions and Daily Life in Colonial Mexico* (2014) sets the essays that comprise their edited volume in relation to the broader field of emotions history with admirable clarity. They place an emphasis on the role of what they term peculiarly Mexican institutions in the framing of emotional expression in the colonial period. This relationship is central to the volume’s contribution to the study of emotions and daily life in colonial Mexico. As the editors put it: “Feelings such as love or hate might swirl around inside the mind, but the ways in which individuals externalize and express these emotions with their bodies or by their speech, their physical actions, or their interactions with other Mexicans are mediated by the prevailing institutions.” (Kindle locations 271-273)

I find the essays in *Emotions and Daily Life in Mexico* richly stimulating in ways that open up further lines of inquiry, particularly when translated into the contact period. That is to say, the early moments of encounter between Amerindians and Europeans, of which the moment when Cortés is said to have wept tears of sorrow beneath the cypress tree, is one example. To be sure, and on the one hand, we might quibble with the notion that emotions “swirl around inside the mind,” as if somehow separate from the body, where the burden of recent scholarship has been on the inseparability of mind and body. (Scheer 2012: 195) But beyond this quibble, a more important issue emerges when considering the emotions in the contact zone: what did mind, and what did body mean to the peoples that encountered one another in 1519?
Night of Sorrows
The answer is briefly: mind and body meant different things that I don’t have time to elaborate on here, but which represent a starting point for any discussion of the tears of Hernán Cortés on the Night of Sorrows. It’s to the night of sorrows I want to turn now to note that in fact Cortés tears barely register in the sources – not in Cortes’s letters to King Charles V, nor in the native accounts gathered in Book XII of the Florentine Codex. He does, however, weep in Francisco López de Gómara’s History of the Conquest of Mexico, who describes how, fleeing across the causeway, Cortés stops, sits down, but not to rest; rather to mourn the dead, the lost treasure, and the loss of such a great city as Tenochtitlan. And Gómara goes on to ask rhetorically, “who would not have wept to see the death and destruction of those who had entered the city with such triumph, pomp and joy?” There is, of course, an assumption underpinning this statement, namely that anybody, confronted by the same circumstances as Cortés, would cry. And yet, of course, what emotions history has taught us is that emotional expression is subject to change over time and crucially, across cultures. That this is the case is acknowledged in two essays on weeping in early modern Spain and pre-conquest Mexica culture. In an oft-cited essay on “Provoked Religious Weeping in Early Modern Spain”, William A. Christian (2004: 39) asserts that a range of sources support “the notion that at least in public, people in early modern Spain wept more easily than they do now.” Meanwhile, in a chapter on “Home, Body, and Emotions” in Mesoamerica, Pablo Escalante Gonzalbo (2004: 249) has observed that “The Nahuas cried more, a lot more, than we cry today, but also more than the sixteenth century Spaniards cried. The importance of the practice of crying must have been so notable to the Spaniards that we find numerous traces of the custom in the colonial chronicles of New Spain.” Measuring the cross cultural and trans-historical indices of tears is no easy task, if it is in fact possible, or desirable. Indeed we might question the impulse toward “competitive emotions,” where asking who cried more, merely leads us up a hermeneutic blind alley. What we can surmise with a degree of certainty, however, is that as an emotional practice – that is cognitive and embodied – weeping was differentially performed by the groups that came into contact in the early sixteenth century, and signified and did different things within these contexts.

In an influential study, Stuart Schwartz (1994: 2) has argued that in the meetings that took place across cultures in the early modern era “members of each society held ideas often unstated of themselves and others and the things that gave them such identities: language, color, ethnicity, kinship, gender, religion and so on.” For me, these often unstated ideas are suffused with emotional considerations. Increasingly scholars of the history of the emotions are recognizing the need to work outside what – with a degree of caricature -- I’ll call the Eurocentric parameters of research in the field to date. (And I think that we find provincial thinking in both Mexican and Euro-American emotions work.) To cite a pioneer in the field, Peter Stearns (2010)– we’ve got to dare to compare. Early modern emotional encounters are ripe for such comparisons – as long as we develop sophisticated ways of approaching comparison.
Bibliography

[The following bibliography includes items cited in the text above that was presented orally at Jinan, as well as some of the reading that informs the colonial element of wider project]


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